

‘Shakuntala: The Play of Memory’

A Woman and Her Oppressed Psyche

One of the prominent feminist writers and thinkers, Simone de Beauvoir transformed into words, the ideology underlying the identity formation of a woman in every patriarchal society. Honor, shame, modesty, decorum, submission and sacrifice are all qualities ingrained into the feminine psyche since childhood. She is crafted and created into an epitome of virtue; an ideal of selflessness, love and compassion, and most importantly upholding the golden virtue of silence. Born with a voice she is conditioned to suppress it into submission and silence.

In patriarchal culture it is the woman who is ordained to be the preserver and carrier of culture and tradition; the upholder of honor and pride. Her natural instincts and desires are sacrificed and her individuality squashed in order to maintain the codes of tradition and culture that binds her life and identity within the boundaries of morality and family honor.

There are many women writers from the subcontinent who have given a loud and clear voice to the ongoing saga of exploitation and abuse of women. These writers through their fictional work have brought forward the story of suffering and pain that engulfs any woman who dares to transgress the predetermined codes of conduct and behavior. In the novel ‘Shakuntala: The Play of Memory’, the writer Namita Gokhale has voiced the anguish and struggle of a woman for liberation. She says, of her novel ‘Shakuntala’,

“I had not imagined that youngsters would like this novel so much.

It shows that I am living in my own set of assumptions,”¹

In this hauntingly beautiful book Namita Gokhale plays with memory and desire by invoking the name of 'Shakuntala'. Just as a musician tosses a phrase and lets it shimmer and flourish on a cascade of sounds, Gokhale discovers an entire world of meaning in her exploration of what the idea of Shakuntala can open up.

“Shakuntala: The Play of Memory” is one of the best works Namita Gokhale has written in the last thirty years. She has established her reputation as one of India's greatest feminist writers. Her interest in Indian mythology is well known. This novel is published in **2005** in which she uses Kalidasa's immortal tale of love and betrayal to explore her ideas of how women have engaged in their own enslavement and liberation with the picaresque adventures of a tempestuous wild girl from the hills whom she has named Shakuntala. She felt indebted to the great poet Kalidasa. Kalidasa was the brightest jewel in the court of King Vikramaditya of Ujjaini. Her novel “Shakuntala” is based on the story of the famous play 'Abhijnana Shakuntalam' written by Kalidasa. In this novel Namita Gokhale has presented the story of a girl named **Shakuntala** who remembered her past life. The writer has belief in rebirth and the Hindu mythology. According to Hindu mythology, it is considered that the soul never dies as it is immortal. Like Plato and Pythagoras and Wordsworth, Namita Gokhale also believed in the transmigration of the soul.

The novel opens with the picture of Kashi, the city of Shiva. The narrator is Shakuntala who remembers her first sight of Kashi. She begins to dream of her previous birth. In her dreams she sees many images and begins to think of the purpose of life. What is death? What is the mystery of life? What do we live for? Why do I die? Can one run away from the self? Does the appetite for life become its own meal? Can the thirst of the river ever slake its waters? She asks the priest on the Ghat – Why do these

memories persist? Shakuntala accepts the belief that to die in Kashi is to escape the cycle of birth and death. But Shakuntala who dies in the city of Shiva, the destroyer of memory, has not forgotten her previous life. She remembers that Shakuntala was the daughter of a Vaidya, a doctor of medicinal plants, and her mother had learnt a little about healing from him. Her father died when she was only five years old. She had a brother only a year older than her. Shakuntala had a keen desire to know her inner self. She was a courageous child and felt no fear while she walked alone in the forest. She grew up in mountain country, like the Shakuntala of the epic. After sometimes Shakuntala was married to **Srijan**. Shakuntala was his third wife. His other wives were dead and had not given him any children. Srijan was a mahasaamant, a rich man, the chief of fourteen villages. Srijan's mother followed the path of Buddha. She had become a nun and shaved her hair before she died. The married life of Shakuntala was very decent and Srijan was very courteous to her. Though Srijan had provided her all the comforts in home yet she did not feel satisfaction. Srijan was anxious for an heir to light his funeral pyre. At that time Shakuntala thought that she had not been successful in performing her duties as a wife. Once when Srijan returned from his travels, he returned with a beautiful woman named **Kamalini**. She had been brought as the handmaiden of Shakuntala. But Shakuntala did not like her arrival and went to the Matrika Temple. Though Srijan loved Shakuntala very much, yet she was constantly troubled by the questions – who was she? Why had Srijan brought her into our household? When she knew that Kamalini had a child, a handsome boy, she was filled with anger and fear. She thought to be a monk or nun like Srijan's mother. But she rejected the whole idea to follow the course of Srijan's mother because becoming a nun would be a defeat to Kamalini. In the month of Vaishakh, she went to the temple of

Gangadwar. When she had worshipped the river, she saw a man before her and she was enchanted by his smile. Shakuntala got pregnant and her husband loved her very much but she was so much fascinated towards the Yavana that she went to the temple of Gangadwar again and visited **Nearchus**, the Yavana. Now she did not care for her husband or her home. She left her home to fulfill her desire to travel and so felt very happy now. Shakuntala travelled many cities – Kashi, Patliputra, Mathura, Magadha, Mithila etc. She enjoyed the Yavana's way of love-making. Though sometimes he was rough and coarse, yet she was happy in the company of Yavana. Nearchus brought Yaduri to his home. But after sometime she was fed up with this new life and saw Kalidasa's *Abhijnana Shakuntalam* enacted, she remembered her past. Now she realized that she betrayed her husband. Now she did not want to live in the company of that Yavana. Shakuntala came to Kashi. Now she was all alone. There she met her death being hit by a charging bull.

This is the story of the novel 'Shakuntala: The Play of Memory'. It underlines the fabulous quality of her story. Her Shakuntala is the female counterpart of Hesse's Siddhartha, a seeker who must follow the trail of her destiny without looking back, solely because it is not the answers that matter but the questions. Here, too, there is a wise, old fisherman, like Hesse's boatman, who teaches her how to fish with life and images of the river, of caves, of secret Mother Goddesses hiding within them to give succour to the rustic Shakuntala. It is a gorgeously touchy feely tale that will bring back memories of the feminist 1960s and the fervour of mystic India.

Namita Gokhale's novel, 'Shakuntala', is, quite fittingly, subtitled 'the play of memory'. It is a delicately woven novel on the life of a rustic belle Shakuntala draws together religion, myth, philosophy faith fears and rich details of customs and rituals of

ancient India. Namita says that this was a period when mother cults were fading away, but there was tremendous energy in economics, and what we now know as eastern India was very cosmopolitan. All these strains can be seen in the novel with a cave dweller talking about mother goddess's powers, and later Shakuntala travelling with a Greek soldier. The novel is rooted in the Romantic tradition with a strong desire for wandering, a poetic sensibility towards nature and a looming tryst with death. The story of Shakuntala's life as a village girl in the hills, her marriage and her subsequent 'elopement' with a Greek traveller is a curious mixture of history, mythology and philosophy. In Kashi, along the river Ganga, a young woman is directed by a sightless priest to come to terms with an earlier life that binds her in the eternal cycle of death and rebirth. She is suddenly invaded by memories. These memories vaguely connect her to an earlier life when she was a rustic belle in a hill-forest. The 'Play of memory' soon becomes an intriguing interplay of history and myth, suffused with profound metaphysical queries about the self which concur with the young girl's very personal and near-existential quest for a part of her "self". Memory here is strong enough to outplay the tricks of time. She recalls the life in which she was Shakuntala, spirited, imaginative and adventurous like her legendary namesake, but destined to suffer the "Samaskaras of abandonment."²

The novel 'Shakuntala: The Play of Memory' grapples with the big questions through the prisms of myth and history. This novel depicts the tragedy of another Shakuntala who dared to live life on her own terms. Namita says:

"It is a very immediate story, she ends, adding, the girl, her enthusiasm, her desire to see the world – are all things that could happen today".³

This new woman, the creation of Namita Gokhale seeks release, but her destiny is sealed by the dogmatic, cantankerous, norms of society. It is a tale of a provincial woman's quest for adventure, travel, sexual fulfillment and bitterness at shackles of domesticity and denial of access to education carries within it an immense potential for social comment with interplay of history, legend and contemporary life. The duties and expectations imposed on Indian women, their samskaras of self-sacrifice, are the mimetic and psychic patterns which connect Shakuntala's story with the living tradition of pain most Indian women sustain. Namita says in an interview:

“My novel is about a young girl called Shakuntala who runs away from her home and husband to see the world. It talks of love and freedom, and the freedom to love. All of us carry the urge to escape our situations, our life scripts, to seek alternative identity, exercise choice, find ourselves, or the persons we might have been”.⁴

The protagonist Shakuntala of Namita Gokhale's *Shakuntala: The Play of Memory* is named after the fifth century dramatist Kalidasa's heroine Sakuntala. She says:

“I was named Shakuntala after the heroine of Kalidasa's classic drama. My namesake was not a mortal like me, she was a nymph, daughter of the celestial Menaka who seduced the sage Vishwamitra and stole his seed. That Shakuntala had been deserted by her mother, and her birth – father Vishwamitra, and later by her husband Dushyanta – one could say that she carried within herself the samskaras of abandonment. Some even consider it an unlucky name”.⁵

While the original Sakuntala is a helpless nymph who is deserted by her husband King Dushyanta and needs her mother Menaka, 'the celestial apsara,' to put things right for her, Gokhale's mortal Shakuntala is bold and restless at a time when women are confined to the household. Shakuntala questions the rules and customs of society, and when the opportunity arrives, she goes out into the unknown to satisfy her adventurous spirit. Shakuntala is the story of a very spirited young woman. Shakuntala, who

“...could never understand rituals, why some things had to be one way rather than another, why a twig on the sacrificial fire must point to the right rather than the left, why a woman who was menstruating was unclean, why games had to have rules. Who made these rules”?⁶

This is about a collective anguish and misery borne of the weight of expectations carried by Indian women, and their submission and self-erasure. It is the story of a woman who had the guts to change her own life, midstream, a woman who wants to see the world and have a liberated life. Yet who had to contend with a mother who continuously warned her that she should ever be like the birds that flew home to their nests at dusk, and not like clouds that wept their tears in distant lands.

‘Remember, Shakuntala’, she said ‘birds return to their nests at dusk, but clouds must weep their tears unseen in distant lands.’⁷

It is apt that Gokhale chooses the backdrop of the rise of Buddhism to tell her story of the typical Indian woman; a time of radical religious dynamism and iconoclasm, when for a woman, even shaving her head and leaving home to become a nun was a kind of freedom. The story follows the life of a girl – a reincarnation of Kalidasa’s Shakuntala –

who enacts what, seems like an unalterable screenplay in this life, while clamouring for freedom to live the way she wants and love the way she wills. “Commence a new life,” the Buddha exhorts, but how is one to do that, questions Shakuntala, without having a new life different from the one delineated by parent, partner, and priest? When she does rewrite the script of her life, literally shedding her anklets and figuratively her shackles, she finds her intent thwarted and her path too twisted to tread. The story draws comparison and contrast from Kalidasa’s Shakuntala, the prime example of a woman caught in a circumstantial whirlpool, rescued only by divine intervention.

At that time when Buddhism and Hinduism were both aggressively trying to outdo the other, when foreigners were making inroads into the country, when Adi Sankaracharya was striding about the country trying to rejuvenate Hinduism, the great book of Kalidasa brings to life customs, rituals, superstitions that still linger centuries down the line. In an interview **Meenakshi Reddy Madhavan** asked Namita Gokhale if the book is about Kalidasa’s Shakuntala, she answered:

“Not really, it uses the original Shakuntala as a take-off point, but this is really a novel about a young woman who lived a long time ago. She pause and then adds, My Shakuntala lives in the mountains and runs away with a Greek soldier.”⁸

‘Like her earlier novels, this novel ‘Shakuntala: The Play of Memory’ also includes quite a bit of sexual content. Gokhale says,

‘I’ve never tried to write about sex in a sniggering, dirty or self-conscious way, and I feel in order to know people you should understand their sexual identities.’⁹

Therefore, the young Shakuntala feels passionately for her husband, longs for the nights where they make love and actually is an active member in the sexual act. Later, even with the Greek soldier whom she meets, her sexuality is uninhibited. Gokhale tells us,

“It’s basically the maturing of Shakuntala’s sexual destiny,”¹⁰

Gokhale has traced the growth and development of her protagonist right from her childhood. Shakuntala is born into a poor 'vanvasi' family, hill people who live near the forests of the mountainous areas in India. She grows up roaming the woods, and spends her time watching clouds and birds. As a girl, she is

“restless to see the world, to wander with the freedom of birds and clouds”¹¹

She loved the woods and yet was restless to see the world, to wander with the freedom of birds and clouds. Her brother Govinda was a man of destiny, whose purpose was to restore order and true Dharma to the world. His tutor was an admirer of classical poetry and it was through his tutor that Shakuntala heard of Kalidasa, the great poet of Magadha. Shakuntala had the curiosity to know the story of Kalidasa’s Shakuntala. His tutor told her the various virtues of Shakuntala and also that she fell in love with King Dushyanta when he came to hunt in the forest. Then he narrated how they got married secretly and Shakuntala lost the ring. He also gave her a book, the manuscript of Kalidasa’s *Abhijana Shakuntalam*. He also explained her why Kalidasa’s heroine was named Shakuntala. After hearing the story of Kalidasa’s Shakuntala, she began to think:

“What would happen if I were to share her fate, I wondered. Would Mother Nature be as kind to me?”¹²

Gokhale's Shakuntala does not realize that a woman is like a cow fettered to a stump and her freedom is like the twine of duty that binds her to her household. Shakuntala's widowed mother suppresses her desire for knowledge

“... as the scriptures were forbidden to women.”¹³

Young girls especially those belonging to orthodox traditions and hailing from socio-economically challenged backgrounds have to face more stringent restrictions and codes that define their existence within confined limits. Shakuntala is a spirited girl and finds it difficult to subdue her free spirit. Denied the support and affection of her mother, who showers all her love on her son **Govinda**; Shakuntala rebels strongly. Shakuntala's brother Govinda is predicted to be a great rishi, a descendent of a great line of sages. Their mother gives all her attention to his education and care, neglecting her. Shakuntala's first step towards womanhood is wrought with the feelings of pain, hurt and abandonment. When her mother finds her bleeding in the kitchen, she scolds her severely

“Have you no modesty, girl! . . . Defiling the household fires . . .

You are a woman now, you had better understand what that implies!”¹⁴

She drags her to the low stoop beside the cowshed and leaves her there. A young child, Shakuntala is left shocked, confused and afraid. She is unaware of what is happening to her and fears that she might bleed to death alone. But the rebellious spirit that she has in her asserts itself and in a fit of rage she breaks through the door and walks towards the wilderness of the forest. It is a strange mysterious woman in the forest who consoles and comforts her, making her realize that she is not accursed but in fact “blessed”

“You have been blessed”... Her voice had a slight metallic rasp. “I see the blood goddess has begun her sacred visitations on your body...”¹⁵

Her words of wisdom seem strange to the naive ears of Shakuntala at the time but in truth are a revelation of the feminine power that lies buried in every woman’s soul; hidden and forgotten. She sows the seed of freedom in her by introducing her to the mysteries and power of the Mother goddess. She is told that in every one of her forms, the goddess is always

“Swamini, mistress of herself”¹⁶

This lesson is valuable to Shakuntala and kindles in her interest to reject responsibilities of a comfortable and happily married life.

Unlike her brother Shakuntala saw no error in disorder; it seemed to be the natural condition of life. Shakuntala believed that the world was of limitless possibilities, awaiting discovery. She did not realize that her desire to see the world would be throttled and that she was enchained by the circumstances of her existence, of her birth, for these themselves were prisoners of antiquated norms that governed the behaviour of brides.

When a girl reaches puberty it is common for families to settle their marriage as soon as possible without a thought as to their immaturity, dreams, aspirations or choice. Marriage is the ultimate destination or goal for every girl’s life; in fact it is the only way she can complete herself and define her identity in a patriarchal society, as someone’s wife. For Shakuntala, marriage is an agreeable proposition than living a confined existence at her mother’s home.

“I was eager to be married, for I saw it as an escape from the bondage of my situation”.¹⁷

Marriage being a happy alternative for the restricted and confined life of Shakuntala, she gladly embraces the changes that it brings into her life. Shakuntala feels there are 'thoughts and events and people'(p.45) in far off lands that she is yet to see and experience. Shakuntala had a deep desire to see an elephant, which symbolized all the things she wanted to achieve in life; not realizing that the animal also symbolizes the other aspect of existence and that if not controlled it could also cause destruction. This fact has been symbolized in 'Shakuntala: The Play of Memory'. In her surging hopes for marital bliss and the freedom and authority it would bestow on her, Shakuntala resembles Naveed in her optimism who pronounces,

“Marriage is power . . . It is freedom . . . Then who can tell you what to do?”¹⁸

But how free is free for a woman bound by the shackles of patriarchy? First she is bound by the codes of honour to her filial household and after marriage to her husband's. Wherever she is, she can only live in an illusion of freedom but never breathe the genuine air of liberation. Shakuntala is much younger to her husband, Srijan who is a widower, having been married twice before. His other wives were dead and had not given him any children. Srijan was a mahasaamant, a rich man, the chief of fourteen villages. Srijan's mother followed the path of Buddha. She had become a nun and shaved her hair before she died. Strong and rebellious in nature, Shakuntala is however coached to appear demure and docile during her marriage, submitting

willingly to the dictates and codes that determine the nature, character and behaviour of a girl: what she should do and what she shouldn't.

“Now I was a bride, I had been instructed to look at the earth, to keep my gaze down and appear modest. Even as I garlanded my bridegroom, I looked down and saw only feet”.¹⁹

After her marriage, life is full of bliss for Shakuntala. The young Shakuntala feels passionately for her husband, longs for the nights where they make love and actually is an active member in the sexual act. She glows with marital happiness and love. The lady of the household she cherishes her new found freedom, and enjoys her walks to the forest and her swims in the streams. However her freedom is bound to her duties as a wife. As a part of the after marriage rituals, Srijan had taken her outside to view the night sky and guide her sight towards,

“. . . the star Arundhati. She . . . the purest of wives, the emblem of fidelity.” And as Srijan guided her vision towards the star, he promises to guide her in their “. . . life together towards the vision of right and wrong.”²⁰

Namita Gokhale has presented Shakuntala as a very curious character who has keen desire to know more, see more and do more. Though Srijan had provided her all the comforts in home yet she did not feel satisfaction. She remarked:

“I was hungry for experience. There were things I wanted to see, to know, to do. My ignorance irked me; I had, for example, never actually viewed an elephant. I had heard that the mrighastin,

described as the beast with a hand, was the noblest and wisest of animals.”²¹

Shakuntala had her own vision of freedom. She had irresistible hunger to see new lands and people and said:

“I knew there was more inside me than the limits of my experience dictated. I thirsted for glimpses of new lands, people, and ideas. It was as if the move from my mother’s home to my husband’s – the half-a-day journey from one village to another – had suddenly made the impossible possible.”²²

However her happy married life is eclipsed by the shadow of her inability to conceive. Srijan was left without an heir from his previous marriages and all hopes were centered on Shakuntala. Various rituals are performed as foretold by astrologers and pundits. The burden of barrenness is the lot of women to bear and Shakuntala finds herself buried underneath this weight. At that time Shakuntala thought that she had not been successful in performing her duties as a wife. Although Srijan was too kind to show his disappointment at her infertility, the ritual reminded her of her inadequacies. Once when Srijan returned from his travels, he returned with a woman who was beautiful and looked like a crane in flight. She had been brought as the handmaiden of Shakuntala. But Shakuntala did not like her arrival and went to the Matrika Temple. She thought that the woman was a temptress, usurper of her joys. She said:

“I was not angry with Srijan – he was a man, men were allowed many women, it was the way of the world as I knew it. But the hurt and betrayal, the prickling of thorns under the sheath of my skin – I

had never known or anticipated these feelings, just as I had never expected my husband to return from his journey to the east with an exotically beautiful woman with cold and mocking eyes.”²³

The secure world of Shakuntala’s marital life starts to develop cracks of suspicion and betrayal. Her confidence shattered and feeling insecure of Srijan’s love and interest, Shakuntala craves for and fights for his attention and love. At that time she felt the world was a place of treason, not of trust. Sometimes she was haunted by wild fancies. She thought to be a monk or nun like Srijan’s mother. She said:

“Perhaps I too could become a monk or a renunciate. Our religion had no place for women, but the Buddhist orders inducted women as novices. Like Srijan’s mother, I would sport a shaved head and wear ochre robes to live a life of penitence. I would walk and travel and see the world.”²⁴

But she rejected the whole idea to follow the course of Srijan’s mother because becoming a nun would be a defeat to Kamalini. She sought solace in the rhythm of cowsheds. Sometimes she used to walk through the forest to the abandoned temple because she did not want to see Kamalini. Namita Gokhale had presented Shakuntala as a great scholar who had full knowledge of Dharma. As she said: The Manava Dharma Shastra says:

“A barren wife should be abandoned in the tenth year, one who bears only daughters in the twelfth, and one whose children all die in the fifteenth.”²⁵

Shakuntala did not allow herself to be disappointed. She consoled herself by thinking that Kamalini is only a Daas and her husband had no relation with her. But she is unsettled and insecure because of Kamalini's presence and often wanders to the Matrika temple in the forest. Eventually Shakuntala does conceive but her pregnancy fails to satisfy the craving in her heart that had always remained hidden within her. When asked by the priest why she was not happy, Shakuntala replies, "I want to see the world"²⁶ and is instructed by the priest to be content in her role as the wife, but contentment or peace is difficult to find when one is involved in a fight with oneself.

Shakuntala is trapped by her own wandering soul. The thirst for 'self' and the thirst for experience that throbs within her ultimately break free in her flight from home.

"If you hold down one thing you hold down the adjoining. In the end, though, it all blows up in your face."²⁷

Exploitation and torture, both physical and psychological hurt and inflict wounds that run deep into the psyche of the victims. Shakuntala has everything that a woman could possibly desire: a prosperous household, material comforts and a loving husband. But then things change. Her very identity is made a hostage to the presence of a mysterious and strange woman by her husband, who instructs her,

"Do not ask any questions . . . She has been brought here as your handmaiden, and that is all. See that you treat her well."²⁸

This sets off a kind of rebellion in Shakuntala. Unable to handle her unspoken jealousies, she chooses to walk out of the relationship. She chooses

“...the freedom to wander, to elsewhere, to seek, and perhaps find...something?”²⁹

In the month of Vaishakh, she went to the temple of Gangadwar. Kamalini was also with her. But when she went there, everything was changed to her. The escape of Shakuntala from the comfortable confines of her home and her role as a wife happens through the agency of an individual whom she chances upon while returning from her visit to the Shiva shrine. She said:

“My life has changed; I feel that I cannot go back to where I have come from. Every limb in my body is alive, and yet I am rested and satiated. Nothing has prepared me for this ecstasy. It defies my life and destiny, disengaging it from the wheel of duty and what should be, throwing it directly into my own hands”³⁰

The stranger whom she encounters is a Yavana, a Greek traveler and merchant who is enticed by her beauty. With Nearchus she redefines her identity as Yaduri, a name that broke the taboos like she did for it stood in slang as a word that

“... signified a yoni, a woman’s private part.”³¹

Now she did not care for her husband or her home. She wanted to fulfill her desire to travel and so felt very happy now. She said:

“I took to my changed circumstances with ease. I did not think of the house in the mountains. The young woman called Yaduri had no history. She lived in the ceaseless present. Only the river travelled with her, its murmur in her life-blood.”³²

The intimacy and exhilaration in his embrace, and the charm and attraction of the strange unknown world he embodies; a world for which she had always craved to know and experience engenders a strange feeling of abandonment in Shakuntala. She leaves him only to return later. Once the priest had explained to her the symbolism of her anklets;

“Your anklets weigh down your feet to keep you rooted in your home and family.”³³

and so when she abandons her home and her husband to flee with the Yavana, Nearchus, she abandons these anklets too.

“Taking off my silver anklets, I flung them into the water and ran towards him.”³⁴

The free spirit that she was born with, Shakuntala escapes from her home, abandoning and breaking the codes of society and culture. Her actions negate any attempts at comprehension at a superficial, practical and materialistic level. Giving in to her sensual instincts with a wild abandon, she embodies the free flowing spirit of nature that breaks all bounds and barriers constructed to obstruct and control her way. She is the life force itself, wanton and free willed losing her way in the maze of sensory pleasures in her unquenchable thirst for an identity of her own; free and liberated.

Society, being codified by man, decrees that woman is inferior; she can do away with this inferiority only by destroying the male's superiority Shakuntala destroys the rules and codes of patriarchy by forging her own path, breaking the taboos that kept her safely reigned in within the honour and decorum of socially sanctified relationships and roles. She travels with Nearchus across the country, eagerly absorbing all the details and

experiences of his travels and knowledge of the world. His passionate and wild love excites and arouses Shakuntala, who devours as much as she herself is devoured. Shakuntala travelled many cities – Kashi, Patliputra, Mathura, Magadha, Mithila etc. She enjoyed the Yavana's way of love-making. Though sometimes he was rough and coarse, yet she was happy in the company of Yavana. She remarked:

“I was greedy for these stories and tried to memorize the strange names he spoke and hold on to them as imagined pictures in my head. Nearchus told me of the ocean, where the rivers go when they leave the land. I could not picture it – water and more water as far as the eye can see... The world was a wild and wondrous place, and I was glad to be free and alone and travelling its surface with this Yavana who had seen and known so much”³⁵

But after sometime she was fed up with this new life and saw Kalidasa's 'Abhijnana Shakuntalam' enacted, she remembered her past. Now she realized that she betrayed her husband. She remarked:

“Even in the moment of her disgrace, Kalidasa's Shakuntala had the sanctity of the secret marriage. But I had betrayed everything. I had renounced my name, I was no longer Shakuntala, only Yaduri, the unmentionable one, I had abandoned the husband whose true wife I was. No matter that he had other wives before me. The noble king Dushyanta had wives aplenty, and yet there was no slur in his love-making with Shakuntala. The apsara Menaka whose daughter Shakuntala was, had seduced the great sage Vishwamitra – but then

she was an immortal, and such deeds are permitted to nymphs and celestials. Only I stood condemned.”³⁶

Shakuntala compares her present with her past. She had loved Sirjan and carried his child within her, yet she is also attached dearly with Nearchus. Yet as she journeys far she realizes that the more she travels the more she only wants to go back home. In her own words,

“My eyes fill with tears. The world is a large place. It is too large for me. I want to go home”.³⁷

She felt that all this happened with her because her name is Shakuntala. Now she realizes that it is the nature of woman to have children and grandchildren and see them grow. She thought that because of her name she suffered all these difficulties. She remarks:

“There is a child in my belly and I have fled from our home. What madness overcame me that day by the river? Perhaps that woman Kamalini, my dimly remembered rival, had cast a spell upon me. Perhaps it was not her doing at all, for I was born under the star of exile, like my namesake Shakuntala”³⁸

Their arrival at Kashi, the holy and mysterious city of redemption, renunciation and salvation touches her soul with an awareness of her own self. Stranded on the left bank of the city meant for outsiders, Shakuntala is reminded of her fall from grace. She becomes deeply conscious of her growing detachment from the body that indulges in sensual pleasures with Nearchus. Her thirst for travel and experiences satiated, she does not want to wander any longer and one night leaves Nearchus to journey across the

river to the other side. Having left Nearchus, she was all alone, no one's wife or mistress, nor sister. There was only she and her unborn daughter, close and fitting, together and alone.

Shakuntala towards the end missed her cow Dasyu. Their warm cattle odour reminded her of home and her eyes were filled with tears.

“I thought of Dasyu, and her calf. Did they miss, or even remember, me? Just this thought, and I could almost taste the clotted curds and fresh butter of the mountains.”³⁹

Shakuntala's wanderings on the streets of Kashi and finally her death re-assert the sanctity and inevitability of the codes that define honour and morality for a woman. Shakuntala goes across to the right shore of Ganga in a boat and when on the right bank, she meets her death being hit by a charging bull. She strayed distractedly in the path of a charging bull. A chanting of verses rose from afar as the bull bowed its head to her as if asking for forgiveness, then establishing its duty, the bull once again buried its horns into Shakuntala.

“...I strayed distractedly into the middle of the lane, and found myself directly in the path of a charging bull that appeared as though from nowhere...A chanting of sacred verses rose from afar; perhaps a procession of monks. The bull bowed its head to me, as if asking forgiveness, before the city shuddered in my vision and pain flashed in my eyes like the light of a thousand suns. There was blood everywhere: a torn womb, where my life and my daughter had been, now destroyed. As though to establish it was only doing its duty, the

bull once again buried its horns in my stomach. The blood rushed out from my abdomen like a fountain, searing my face, my hands, and my feet.”⁴⁰

Fallen from grace and dignity, a woman’s transgression can only be met with human or divine retribution. The world had abandoned her and she sought her redemption on the right bank of Kashi. Again and again the words of the Bhikkuni reverberated in her mind,

Awake! Arise. Commence a new life⁴¹

for the world had no place for her. The laws of karma play themselves out at three levels: in the ether of human thoughts, in the consequences of human actions, in the finality of human fate. Of these triple strands of destiny, in only one was it proclaimed that she go back home. As a flame is extinguished Shakuntala died in Kashi which was a blessing, though she did not wish it so. She travels to and dies in the holy city of Benaras in the hope of getting salvation. She rejected the bile, the defeat, the ignominy of death. She was determined not to depart humiliated, for she wanted to hide, escape and return. After she died she had no body to slow her down, her feet were not weighted with silver anklets. She continued on her journey intent on her destination, so much so that even Kali was moved by the courage of her battling soul and granted her safe passage. Her resolution faltered only at the spot on the banks of the river where she had erred in her marital duties and had discarded her anklets by seeking to live with Nearchus. It did not matter to her any more, as she realized that

she “had lived her life one way rather than another. The world would always have its way; at least I had searched for mine”.⁴²

As Shakuntala yields to her sexuality and succumbs to the impulse for adventure, religion, society and her own preconditioning move in to punish her.

“Is it the river she hears, or Shiva’s damru, the beat of time, drumming in her blood, forcing her breath away? She strains to hold on to her daughter as the Kashini restrains her: ‘the world has no place for us,’ she whispers.”⁴³

Through Shakuntala Namita Gokhale raised the question of the equality of woman with man. Shakuntala wants to see the world but she is not allowed to do so. Before marriage she is under the bondage of her mother and after marriage she is shackled with the morality and duties of a wife. She wants to get religious knowledge like her brother. She wants to see the world but she knows that women are not allowed to read scriptures. Through her Namita Gokhale remarks:

“A man’s equal in bed, why could I not desire what men enjoyed: the freedom to wander, to be elsewhere, to seek, and perhaps find ... something.”⁴⁴

Namita Gokhale is indebted to Buddha’s principles. She asserts the influence of Buddha upon Shakuntala. Although he renounced the world, he did not renounce the world of women, for his mercy extends to all creation. Like the great saints and philosophers, Namita Gokhale asks:

“What do we live for? Why do we die? To run away, always to run away from the self? Does the appetite for life become its own meal? Can the thirst of the river slake its waters ?”⁴⁵

She further asks:

“Does the body rule the mind or mind the body.” ? ⁴⁶

She has an urge to know the purpose of life. Death is inevitable; all would leave this world and move on to the ones beyond. In *Shakuntala* she presents the conversation between Shakuntala and Kundan, the fisherman. Shakuntala asks:

“I carried little faith in the village priest and his stories about the path of the soul after death, of the various levels of purgatory, of the pitralok and the heaven of Indra and so on. How, after all, could anybody who had not actually died know these things?”⁴⁷

Original and heart-rending, *Shakuntala* enthralls in its vivid portrayal of the tragic life of a woman whose desire to live on her own terms is thwarted at every turn by circumstance and the age in which she lives. In an atmosphere that oppresses a woman and negates her identity, a woman literally has no voice of her own. If something bad happens to her it is always the fault of the woman. A woman's ordeal of life and death as faced by Shakuntala is something that she had asked for by daring to defy the codes of honour that defined her place and identity.

Namita explores the psyche of an Indian woman through the story of Shakuntala. But nothing has changed. The voices from all those centuries ago still ring true. We come face to face with our own twenty first century realities, and here we are, still afraid to live, because of what society might say. A woman has her nose cut off, another gets striped and raped, a third gets killed. There are numerous tales of inhuman and beastly treatment that women of all ages have to face and endure in this world of ours. Many a young girl has to lose their dreams and compromise to a life of denial, play roles

decreed out for them irrespective of their own desires and choices. Every year many a girl dies an unnatural death at the altar of patriarchal honour literally or symbolically. What is true honour but a respect for the life that flows through all of us; the divine spark that enlightens each individual, men or women. Shakuntala may have been condemned by the society and culture in which she lived, but the new woman in her remained determined as ever to live life and die on her own terms. Shakuntala urges women not to be afraid; to receive this gift of life with both their hands and learn to live without fear; to follow their dreams and never forget that the Devi Shakti is ever within us.

The people who inhabit Gokhale's allegorical tale are stereotypes – the toiling, sweating mother, the favoured, weakling brother beset by childhood visions, the benevolent tutor, the loving yet disappointing husband who brings in the 'other woman', the disdainful handmaiden from the East, the raffish itinerant Greek, along with an assortment of demonesses and goddesses. What lifts the story up from banality and places it in the category of a timeless tale is Gokhale's charming telling of it. While paring characters to symbolic caricature, she creates a poetic polychrome world, ambient with history and cross-hatched with lucid, spare prose. It's a world of slowly moving monks, philosophical platitudes, binding karmas and a nirvanic Kashi, of cowbells and coiled hair, carved chalices and pickled mangoes, hymns and herbs, yonis and yagnas, omens and oils sanyasis and Shiva. Her descriptions and allusions evoke: The sky is the colour of 'a lotus leaf' a woman looks like a 'crane in flight', a voice is like a 'tautly drawn veena string', a mind travels like 'pollen on a bee', tongues meet and circle like 'waves on the river' and urgent lovers 'scramble into each other like rabbits into their burrows'. Despite the reported five years spent on the novel, Gokhale has not obfuscated her

writing with historical trivia. While the reincarnation device seems a trifle contrived, Gokhale is perfect as the voice of the young girl-women, capturing her with a freshness that stays till the last page.

Gokhale's gripping and nuanced narrative offers a colourful template of ancient Indian life, rich in details of customs and rituals, faiths and fears, omens and superstitions. Her description of the ancient Kashi is lyrical and lingering. Namita Gokhale combines her extraordinary gift for storytelling with history, religion and philosophy to craft a timeless tale that transcends its ancient setting. Gokhale skillfully makes Shakuntala's yearning for the part of herself which takes her away from "home" (owned by her husband Srijan and shared by a housemaid, Kamalini, of whom she was jealous) contingent upon the gradual unfurling of an inward-turned Indian society.

Namita Gokhale's style is lusciously elegant with images of female sensuality and eroticism adequately converging the colours and vigor of sentiments into a harmonious pattern of aesthetically integrated ideology of contemporary humanity and feminism. The delight which it affords is rather by the exquisite picturisation of the narrative, its colour and variety, bright and sensitive, sensuous, at the same time ripe in breadth and scope. The central myth in Gokhale's *Shakuntala* is the myth of freedom. Based on the dialectical struggle between the worlds of disappearance and reality, matter and spirit, evil and good, death and life, the myth emphasized the evolutionary view of human nature. The author is not circumscribed by the narrowness while placing Buddhism (her brother Guresvara and his fellow monks) and Brahminical Hinduism side by side with happy turns of language. The profoundness of Shakuntala's mental and emotional structure of the characters Srijan, Kamalini, Guresvara, is at times difficult to understand.

In the novel language flows easily, and has a wistful edge to it, which serves as a reminder of the many precious things Shakuntala has lost in her lifetime. The tone of the novel is quiet and a bit haunting, because of the supernatural and the mystic that have a constant presence in the background of the story. Perhaps this is enhanced by the knowledge that Shakuntala is already dead at the beginning of the novel, and the story is a flashback recounted by her spirit.

Gokhale draws deeply from Hindu mythology and philosophy, and although some of the symbolism in Shakuntala can be easily understood, others are vague. The metaphorical use of incidents and dialogues maybe lost on a reader not fully familiar with Hindu philosophy.

It took Gokhale five years to write Shakuntala, and in her own words, it is 'her most painstaking work.' The in-depth research about the time period and the historic places that was required for the novel is evident in the lively and pictorial descriptions that add greatly to the plot, which drags at some points. Shakuntala's grievances about being oppressed and her restlessness are constantly brought up by Shakuntala herself as she narrates her story, and this makes the plot monotonous at times. Another interesting fact about the book is that Penguin India, in association with Yatra Books, has published this novel simultaneously in both Hindi and English, as part of their regional languages publishing programme.

In this novel Namita Gokhale has successfully interwoven religion, social history and a timeless tale to produce a story that stands out for its rich narrative text. It is undoubtedly one of her best works so far. Her style is richly sensuous and has a distinct flow and poise. Her delineation of desire as an erotic charge that must need be fed or

nurtured in a multiplicity of ways, that includes what was known as *shringar*, or more importantly, a refining of the senses, is what makes the narrative as old as the hills and modern. The images used are also telling, though in places, especially in the climatic episode, it may seem too descriptive. Gokhale's use of language is luminous with Sanskrit words and sounds, her invocation of trees and flowers, of birds and fruit, of starry constellations, of textiles and pieces of jewellery that Shakuntala wears as a young bride. But Gokhale is good at weaving the notion of “birth-cycle” in Hindu mythology, with the “historical” tragedy of an Indian woman.

Society did not even merit an unmarried girl with a caste or a varna, even if the girl was born to Brahmin parents, like Shakuntala. Only upon marriage could she rise to the gotra of her husband's caste. It was in this culture that an enlightened woman like Shakuntala was born and reared. Little wonder that a woman like her, a woman ahead of her times, wanted to break free from all the shackles that bound her and weighed her down and held her free spirit hostage. She was a new woman in every sense who had the courage to deconstruct feminism. Shakuntala may have been condemned by the society and culture in which she lived, but the new woman in her remained determined as ever to live life and die on her own terms.

The novel cannot quite transcend the plight-of-an-oppressed-woman storyline, and it is, at the end, about a woman who lives life her own way, in defiance of social and religious obstacles. The novelist raises the question of the equality of woman with man as Shakuntala, the protagonist, has the longing to travel like man but she is helpless and wants to get religious knowledge like her brother. She keeps mum about her opinions because she knows that scriptures are forbidden to women. Even though the

protagonist's death is certain, the end does have a surprise for the reader in the form of a chapter that is numbered '00'.

The novel has an ending of renewal and hope. Shakuntala meandered in her path to find her own 'self' but even in her death she declared,

“The world is a very large place. But here, by the river, the night breeze cooled my temples, and the sound of the waves was like a caress”... “Don't weep for me, I murmured, to nobody really. I would not weep for my daughter; I would not waste my tears. I had not wasted my life.”⁴⁸

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